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## Science for special interests

By Anthony Robbins, 12/7/2003

SCIENTISTS ARE joining the ranks of Americans distraught over radical Bush administration transgressions of America's democratic traditions of even-handedness. Scientists reacted first and angrily when the Bush administration trespassed on accepted government practices for acquiring scientific advice.

Administration actions were truly brazen -- packing federal advisory committees with experts selected to agree with administration viewpoints and policies. A year ago, we complained publicly, but only in a scientific journal, about administration appointment practices: "Scientific advisory committees do not exist to tell the secretary what he or she wants to hear, but rather to help the secretary, and the nation, address complex issues."

Now President Bush's Office of Management and Budget has crafted a far more subtle way to assure that policies that serve the president's political donors will move forward, while those less favored will suffer endless delay.

The dangerous proposal is buried in an OMB Bulletin on peer review dated Aug. 29, 2003 -- not something scientists usually peruse. The Bulletin, if finally adopted, would place the OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy in the position of approving the scientific peer review used by all executive branch agencies for "all significant regulatory-science documents."

The Bulletin claims that this simply enhances peer review -- the accepted method for judging all scientific work or studies. Yet in the Bulletin, OMB introduces a radical new idea, camouflaged in benign language, that reviewers should be "independent of the agency" for whom the review is being conducted.

Not wrong on its face, but what does independent mean? Among reasons that would disqualify a reviewer for lack of independence is that he or she is "currently receiving or seeking substantial funding from the agency." Those receiving agency grants, and thus lacking independence, are the very same scientists judged by the agency to be the best to conduct the nation's publicly funded research.

If this meant excluding a handful of scientists, it might not be unreasonable. But were federal science agencies to be required to disqualify all scientists who had ever received agency funds, this would drastically limit the pool of "independent" reviewers.

To grasp the implications of this radical departure, one must recognize that in the United States there are effectively two pots of money that support science: one from government and one from industry. (A much smaller contribution comes from charitable foundations.) If one excludes scientists supported by the government, including most scientists based at universities, the remaining pool of reviewers will be largely from industry -- corporate political supporters of George W. Bush.

Hence the goal of the proposed peer review rules is chillingly similar to this administration's earlier efforts to stack Federal Advisory Committees with industry scientists. Where interests of the public and of industry conflict, the scientific advice our government receives will be far more likely to serve the interests of industry than the interests of the whole population.

OMB's Bulletin consists chiefly of new peer review requirements that have the power to delay regulatory actions intended to protect the public. On the same day that OMB released the Bulletin, Science magazine published an apparently prescient Policy Forum article, "False Alarms over Environmental False Alarms." The authors warn against excess caution when it comes to protecting our environment, urging society not to "turn down the sensitivity of our environmental alarm."

This advice applies to public health as well, where protection of the public is often achieved with the help of the same kind of "regulatory-science documents" that OMB would use industry-dominated panels to review. OMB's proposed requirements carry the risk of turning down the sensitivity of our public health alarms.

But the underlying message in the OMB Bulletin is far more distressing.

The Bush administration seems to have rejected an accepted tenet of American democracy -- "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" -- and recast government as a special interest entity that needs to be balanced against other groups in our society. For those of us who have worked in government for most of our scientific lives and who did so to serve the people, it is particularly distressing to learn that the Bush administration sees us a threat to America.

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